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The Forgotten (Irish) History of the Mexican-American War: An Interview with Pino Cacucci

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Abstract:

The text presents an edited transcript of an interview with Italian writer Pino Cacucci conducted in Gijón, Spain, on July 13th, 2016. The subject of the interview is his latest novel, *Quelli del San Patricio* (2015), about a group of soldiers, mostly Irish Catholic immigrants, who deserted from the US Army during the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and under the leadership of John Riley formed a military unit, the Saint Patrick's Battalion, to fight with the Mexicans. He mainly discusses what got him interested in the San Patricios, the process of turning history into narrative fiction, the criticisms the novel might raise for not being entirely faithful to historical fact, and the parallelisms that can be drawn between nineteenth century Irish emigration to the US and the current refugee crisis in Europe.

Keywords: Cacucci Pino, Irish emigration, Mexican-American War, Riley John, Saint Patrick's Battalion

Born in Alessandria in 1955, Pino Cacucci is a graduate in DAMS (*Discipline delle Arti, della Musica e dello Spettacolo*) from the University of Bologna. An anarchist sympathizer in the 1970s, he took an active part in the Italian 1977 Movement. In the early 1980s he lived in Paris and Barcelona and first started to travel to South America. He soon became taken with Mexico, where he settled between 1984 and 1989. Although Cacucci returned to live in Italy in 1990, he has continued visiting Mexico regularly ever since.

Cacucci published his first novel, *Outland rock*, in 1988. More than twenty novels have followed since – among them, *San Isidro Fútbol* (1991), *In ogni caso nessun rimorso* (1994), *Demasiado corazón* (1999) and *Mahahual* (2014) –, as well as journalistic articles, short stories, essays, travel books, cookbooks and theatrical plays. His novels are usually about forgotten, de-

feated and/or controversial historical figures, which he aims to rescue from oblivion and ignominy by showing that there is much more to them than what has come down in history. Also a screenwriter and a prolific translator, he has turned into Italian about ninety Spanish and South-American titles.

His latest novel, *Quelli del San Patricio* (2015), is set in the Mexican-American War, fought between the United States and Mexico from 1846 to 1848. Sparked by the latter's refusal to recognise the Republic of Texas, which split up from Mexico in 1836 and was annexed by the United States in 1845, and sold much of its territory to the US, the war was a series of humiliating defeats for the poorly trained, ill equipped and poorly led Mexican troops, which could do little against the invading armies from the north. In early 1848, with Mexico City in the hands of the Americans, the Mexican Government agreed to sign the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty, which ended the war and set the Rio Grande as a border between the US and Mexico, and therefore gave the US control over extensive areas of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, California, Wyoming and Colorado.

Quelli del San Patricio focuses on the historical figure of John Riley (b. 1817-1818), a native of County Galway who arrived in Texas as a US Army private, deserted in April 1846 and eventually became the leader of the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a recognised military unit in the Mexican Army made up of former US artillery and infantry – mostly Catholic Irish who had immigrated to the US following the outbreak of the potato blight in Ireland and defected to Mexico in the course of the Mexican-American War. Widely praised for their bravery in battle, the San Patricios fought their last stand at the Battle of Churubusco in August 1847, where a majority of them was either killed or captured. The captured were then court-martialled and about 50 were found guilty of desertion and hanged. Having deserted a few days before war was declared on Mexico, Riley, however, was lashed, yoked and branded with a D for deserter. After the war, he was discharged and allowed to remain in Mexico, where he died around 1850.

What follows is an edited transcript of the interview Pino Cacucci kindly granted us while he was in Gijón, Spain, to present the Spanish edition of *Quelli del San Patricio*, *Los del San Patricio* (2016), at the 29th *Semana Negra* book festival. The Italian writer discusses what got him interested in the San Patricios, the process of turning history into narrative fiction, the criticisms the novel might raise for not being entirely faithful to historical fact, and the parallelisms that can be drawn between nineteenth century Irish emigration to the US and the current refugee crisis in Europe.

MO: The first question I would like to ask is how did you, an Italian writer from Alessandria, get interested in a story that happened about 170 years ago on the other side of the Atlantic and, more specifically, in Mexico, a country with little Italian immigration?

C: I guess it comes from my passion, my love, for Mexico. I've been visiting Mexico most of my life. I lived there for a while and I've suffered the illness of being in love with the country for over thirty years, although it seems there has been more tragedy than joy there lately... Anyway, a visit to Mexico is always interesting.

Mexico is a country where memories are kept very much alive. I first heard about the San Patricios a long time ago, as the Mexican-American War and especially the Saint Patrick's Battalion are commemorated annually in Mexico City. I soon grew very curious about the memory of the Irish in Mexico. In the capital you can also find a bust of John Riley, a plaque bearing the names of many San Patricios who were hanged and, in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, the Wall of Honour, a wall of national heroes, among them the Saint Patrick's Battalion. Besides, they have turned the former Convent of Churubusco, where the Irish battalion fought their last stand, into a museum about the foreign invasions of Mexico, the Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones. Most of the space in the museum is dedicated to the Mexican-American War and there are one or two rooms about the Battle of Churubusco, a diorama, flags, weapons... At some point I started to spend quite a lot of time in the museum. I got access to several texts there and began to think about how I could tell the story of the San Patricios.

I've always felt an attraction for the history of Irish rebellion. I saw potential for a very interesting story in how the rebelliousness of the Irish against the English turned into insubordination and desertion from the United States Army, and enrolment in the Mexican Army. They could have started over anywhere in Mexico, but they chose to fight with the Mexicans against the Americans.

I spent years, at least ten, doing research – I was always unsatisfied, I always felt something was missing. In the meanwhile, I got plenty of help – you can find this at the end of the book – from friends such as Paco Taibo II and his brother Benito, who got me books about the Mexican-American War, especially reports and memoirs by Mexican officers, which give every detail of the battles. These books came in handy to reconstruct the events of the battles, which have been largely ignored by US historians, as they are not convenient for them.

In the course of my research I learned that it's very likely that John Riley was not hanged with the other captured San Patricios because someone managed to prove that he had deserted a few days before the United States declared war against Mexico and, as a consequence, he couldn't be accused of wartime desertion. Back then, desertion was punished with execution by a firing squad, but the San Patricios were hanged to make them die a more painful death. I also learned that John Riley may have died in Veracruz in 1850, as there is a record in the parish register of the port of Veracruz for the death of a Juan – they called him *Juan* in Mexico – Reley, an Irishman who died *borracho*, that is, who died as a result of drunkenness.

I think there is a very strong symbolism in John Riley. He went through hell and was the only survivor of a battalion which was also a group of friends in life and in death; however, he couldn't get over the war and took to drinking mescal, which led him to an early death. This gave me the opportunity to make occasional shifts in narrative voice and make John Riley the narrator of part of his own story.

Eventually, I came round to writing the book. The release of *San Patricio*, an album by The Chieftains and Ry Cooder, gave me a big push to get down to writing. I thought, "Ah, the story is coming out! I have to buck up my ideas before someone else does. I already have everything I can possibly get about the San Patricios. I'm going to shape it into a novel so that I can tell about their emotions, their sufferings, their humiliations..."

MO: Regardless of how interesting you may find the story of the San Patricios, why would you say it can be relevant to modern readers in Italy, Spain or anywhere else? Did you have a target in mind while you were writing the novel?

C: Most of my books are about finding forgotten history, digging the past and showing that there are things that have been forgotten but are worth being told and known. Over the years, my readers, although they are not that many, have proven to be eager to know these stories from the past, the point of view of the defeated. Victors shape history in their own image, whereas the defeated are usually denied a place in official history.

Also, I believe my books are very contemporary. In this specific case, we are dealing with emigration from Ireland, which over the first half of the nineteenth century found itself in a situation very similar to that of countries in Africa and Asia today, for instance, Syria. The country was under English rule at the time; it was not a god that sent the famine. It was English rule that imposed the monoculture of flax in Ireland. When the blight destroyed the potato crop, up to a million Irishmen and women died of starvation. I see something universal there – pretty much the same thing is happening now.

There is as much racism today as there was in the nineteenth century, although this is also forgotten history. It's quite hard to imagine that back then, when the Irish started to arrive in the US, they were treated as many African immigrants and Syrian refugees are being treated in Europe today. The Irish were met with hostility and things often heard today, like "they come to steal our jobs", were also common then. What jobs could they possibly steal from the Americans, who were already more well-off? The Irish had to live in slums. There are many details that point out that other peoples are going through what the Irish went through, and that gave me a strong motivation to tell how the Irish were treated in this period.

MO: It is obvious that you did extensive historical research for the novel. However, the book is not, nor intends to be, a historical essay. Following up on

this, I would like to know if 1) you would label it as revisionist history, and 2) when writing historical fiction, you ever draw a line between, say, modifiable and non-modifiable facts.

C: "Revisionist" is an ambiguous, even dangerous, term. I would say that *Quelli del San Patricio* is untold rather than revisionist history that has to be told. I don't think I did anything extraordinary. I am not a historian; I don't have access to every source. Still, I have used the novel form to tell a story that had been forgotten, erased out of history, deemed as inconvenient.

Once I reached a point where I started thinking, "Well, it's been a ten year search and I've got plenty of materials to write about. It's about time to try to flesh them out into a story", I had to start considering to what extent the story would be faithful to the historical events I was pretty sure were factual. As I said before, after going through thousands of pages of reports and memoirs of Mexicans who took part in the war and essays by contemporary intellectuals that only Mexicans can read, as they haven't been published in other countries, I felt I had everything I could possibly need to reconstruct the battles in detail.

I didn't have as many details about the everyday of those men, though. For example, Patrick Dalton did exist in real life. We are certain that his name was that, he was hanged and was John Riley's best friend. Then, it seems that John Riley had a Mexican partner. We know neither her name nor how the relationship unfolded. Still, several sources confirm that Riley did have a partner and suggest that he may have lived with her in Veracruz the final two years of his life. Therefore, I had to invent a character. Knowing that guerrilla warfare was extensively used by the Mexicans, I also intended her as a symbol of guerrilla struggle. The Americans preferred to call the Mexican irregulars "bandits" rather than "guerrilla fighters"; however, the word "guerrilla" soon caught on in Mexico. Besides, there are some accounts that say that there were many female fighters in the guerrillas. They inflicted losses on the American invaders, sometimes heavier than those inflicted by the Mexican Army. I used all this information to create the character of Consuelo, who is a female guerrilla fighter.

MO: Is the name Consuelo ("solace" in Spanish) intended to be symbolic?

C: Yes, I think so. She was John Riley's solace, wasn't she? Some texts mention a Maria, but Maria is often used in Mexico as a placeholder name for any woman. I don't know if her name was actually Maria, maybe...

I believe I had to allow John Riley to have his own voice so that I could put in the book all the things he had to go through to survive and make a living. He arrives in the US with an inner rebelliousness against the English and the military, and yet he enlists in the army because there is no other way

to make a living. These events are real, we know they occurred, but I have taken some liberties with them.

Funnily enough, I set down to putting the novel together while the son of a couple of friends was doing a course at University College Cork in Ireland. When he was back in Italy for the holidays, I would tell him what I was doing and he would ask "How can I help you? Do you want me to get you materials for the book there?" The Saint Patrick's Battalion is commemorated in Ireland, but unfortunately there are few texts available there.

He had met a professor of Gaelic at University College Cork. I already knew that speaking Gaelic was forbidden in the US Army at the time, mainly because no one else could understand what the Irish were saying when they were talking among themselves. The prohibition was total and when someone was caught speaking Gaelic, they were punished with lashing. I decided that I wanted to make them talk among themselves, swear and insult in Gaelic. I wanted them to say things like "We gonna kill you all!" and "Yo mama's such a slut..." in Irish.

My friend came up to the professor with a list of swear words, insults... He stared at him as if he were crazy. "Who on earth wants to know how to say 'Yo mama's such a slut...' in Gaelic?", he said. My friend explained that an Italian writer was writing a novel about the San Patricios – which also seemed pretty weird to the professor – and wanted to give them an authentic voice. He gave me quite a comprehensive list of phrases, swear words and insults in Gaelic. It seemed to me that it would add realism to the novel.

MO: As far as I know, the novel has not been published in English yet, has it?

C: No, not yet. They're trying to get it published in English. It's difficult, though.

MO: I would like to address now some of the criticisms I think the novel might raise in Ireland and among the Irish diaspora. The first criticism would have to do with the language issue. In the novel you seem to suggest that for Riley and his men the straw that broke the camel's back was the prohibition on speaking Gaelic. However, the few accounts of these events published in Anglo-Saxon countries insist that the desertion of the San Patricios was ultimately motivated by religion. Why did you decide to make a bigger emphasis on the linguistic rather than the religious issue?

C: To tell you the truth, I just didn't realise I was making a bigger emphasis on the linguistic issue. I believed it was just one detail among many. I can't deny that religion was important, but I'm not so sure that it was the main motive for rebellion. As I see it, racism comes first. The Irish arrive in the US and are met with racism. Then, they join the US Army and keep being

treated with racism, are regarded as foreign Irish, rather than proper American, soldiers. Besides, they're Roman Catholic, whereas the official religion of the US Army is Protestantism – a legacy of the Puritans. The Irish are forced to follow the Protestant services and forbidden to attend Mass. Once they get to Texas, they're punished when they go to a Catholic Church – provided that they are able to find one that hasn't been burned down yet. Besides all this, there is the prohibition on Gaelic. Maybe it has ended up being the main motive for rebellion in the book, but I intended it to be one of many.

MO: As a reader, you get the impression that there certainly was racism in the army against the Irish, but many times you do feel it was based on language.

C: I may have placed emphasis on language because I did want to remind the reader that English was not the mother tongue of these men. The English language was imposed in Ireland by English rule. When they got to the United States, the Irish weren't allowed to speak Gaelic either. As a consequence, it might seem that I believe that language was their main motive for desertion – I don't. To me, it definitely was one of many motives, one of many humiliations they had to endure and above all, a by-product of racism. Also, I guess we can assume these young men brought over from Ireland a tendency towards rebellion and, once they got in the army, they wouldn't shut up when told to; they would be looking for trouble; they would stand up to American officers.

MO: Indiscipline has remained a recurrent problem in the United States Army. I may be wrong, but I think it was a rather contentious issue during World War II and the Vietnam War.

C: Yes, that's true. We should take into account that, in the mid-nineteenth century, most soldiers in the American Army hadn't even been born in the United States. They were Polish, German, Italian... – a medley of nationalities. Maintaining discipline in an army where ten languages are spoken must be difficult, right? Maybe that's why the punishments were so harsh.

MO: Getting back to the possible criticisms Quelli del San Patricio may get, another could be that the novel somehow overestimates the importance of the pre-Famine Irish emigration to the United States and the failure of the potato crop in 1816-17. As a matter of fact, it sometimes is as if many of the social changes the Great Irish Famine set in motion in the late 1840s – e.g., massive emigration from Ireland, anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice in the US... – were already in full swing twenty or thirty years earlier. In a way, some might feel that you underestimate the enormous impact of the Great Famine on both sides of the Atlantic.

C: On the one hand, I wanted to include that in the book. On the other hand, I didn't want to devote many pages to the two Irish famines, so in the end I decided I would make Riley reminisce briefly about his childhood in Ireland. I was rather more interested in telling how, once they came of age, these Irish men emigrated to escape starvation. Then, they decided to defect out of a combination of pride, dignity and protest against the mistreatment of the Mexicans. I also wanted to tell how, when they came into contact with the reality of Mexico, they realised they had a lot in common with the Mexicans beyond Catholicism.

Even nowadays, though there hasn't been much Irish immigration to Mexico, the Mexicans feel they have something in common with the history of Ireland, the way the Irish mix with other people, the Irish warmth... I don't know. The Mexicans just couldn't communicate at an intimate level with either the Americans or the English, and even less with the Germans. They could with the Irish.

This direct contact convinced them that something had to be done against what the US Army was doing to the Mexicans. Well, the few contemporary American historians that chose to tackle this issue tell that the Irish would desert from the US Army because they were always drunk, fell in love with Mexican *señoritas* (i.e., prostitutes), stayed with the Mexicans and eventually the Mexican Army coerced them to fight with them. However, I don't think things were that simple, that filthy, that common. They didn't decide to ruin their lives just because they fell in love with a *señorita*. I'm sure there were deeper, stronger motives, which were sparked by contact with Mexico.

MO: One last possible criticism I would like to bring up has to do with the character of Captain Aaron Cohen, a Jewish graduate from West Point who shows sympathy and respect for John Riley and his men. To me, it works really well as a character, but I fear that some will find him anachronistic, inspired more by classic Hollywood films than by historical evidence. Why did you choose to make him Jewish? I don't know; he could have been an assimilated Irishman...

C: Consuelo and Aaron Cohen are the main characters I invented. I made him Jewish because I feel Jews must have endured their own share of humiliations in the American Army, although Cohen comes from West Point. We know that a majority of generals in the invading army did not come from The Academy; they were slave owners, had enormous estates in the South and regarded West Point graduates as Hooray Henrys who did know everything about war, but nothing about sweat and blood. Zachary Taylor was one of these generals.

We also know that at the Battle of Churubusco, when the last seventy-two San Patricios had already run out of ammunition and were fighting with their bayonets, an American officer, a captain of the US Army, put up a white handkerchief on the point of his sword, stood before his soldiers and said, "Enough is enough. This is unfair slaughtering, they can no longer defend

themselves". This event recurs in several texts – even in Mexican accounts. Come to think of it, for the San Patricios it would have been much better to be killed by shrapnel there than be hanged, wouldn't it? Anyway, the event shows that there were officers with a conscience in the US Army. I took this and built on it to flesh out a character that may well be anachronistic, but allowed me to give another point of view.

I wonder how many were thinking back then, "We're doing things that are wrong; however, if I chickened out and let others do this job, it'd be worse. I'm working within the system to change it". It's like many police officers – they think they're one of the good guys, they see corruption and violence, and yet, they stay in because they know that, should they quit, someone worse would join the force. It was very symbolic to me. It was a temptation I couldn't resist. If I could have made him Italian, German..., I would have. However, making him Jewish gave me the chance to give that point of view. Still, Cohen doesn't stay friends with Riley; they fall out in the end, don't they?

MO: At the end of Quelli del San Patricio, you mention that Irish music gave you a push to get down to writing the novel. However, as I was reading it, the Irish-American filmmaker John Ford kept coming to my mind. I think that some parallelisms can be drawn between the novel and Ford's films, especially the Cavalry Trilogy (Fort Apache, 1948; She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, 1949; Rio Grande, 1950), Sergeant Rutledge (1960), The Man who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) and Cheyenne Autumn (1964). More specifically, I would say you hold rather similar views about American expansionism, the dual nature of the US Army, the role of the Irish as subalterns of WASP colonialism, the blurry lines between legend and fact... Even the opening scene, with Riley and Cohen riding across the Texan landscape, is very Fordian. Did you use Ford's films as a reference while writing Quelli del San Patricio?

C: Even though I am an avid consumer of films, I didn't think of John Ford while writing the novel. If I did, it certainly wasn't conscious! I did see his films several times when I was young; I grew up with them. It's interesting. Maybe they have remained in my mind. I'm quite sure that more recent films have influenced the novel, though. *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Dances with Wolves* are still fresh in my memory, as in general is the "revision" – yes, between inverted commas – of the Western genre Hollywood has made over the last twenty years or so. I guess the opening scene in *Quelli del San Patricio* comes from one of these films.

MO: Getting back to the topic of American expansionism, I found it interesting that the term "colonialism" itself is not mentioned until very late in the book. You often hint that the Mexican-American War is a colonial war, but "colonialism" seems to have been carefully avoided, doesn't it?

C: Yes. Without much thought, I went for the term “conquest”. Mexico had already been subjected to conquest by the Spanish, by Hernan Cortes. The Mexican-American War meant for Mexico a return of the conquistadors, and a conquest worse than that of the Spanish four centuries before. The term “colonialism” is more recent. In fact, I don’t even know if it was used back then. I consider “colonialism” a rather dangerous, very political term. For Mexico, I prefer to use “conquest” and “conquistadors”, as the Mexican-American War was a war of conquest which eventually evolved into a type of colonialism which is still alive and well. In many aspects – especially commercial, but also cultural – today’s Mexico is a colony of the United States.

MO: *I would like to ask you now about your narrative technique. I find that unlike other authors, who just allow the characters to speak in dialogue, it seems important to you to let the main character address the reader through occasional first-person accounts. It is important in Quelli del San Patricio and also is in Without a Glimmer of Remorse, which has recently come out in Spain. Why?*

C: I often try in my books to get into the head of the main character. In *Quelli del San Patricio*, this device gave me the chance to get to know Riley’s most intimate memories as a young Irishman, as an emigrant and, at the end, as a defeated man, constantly surrounded by the ghosts of his friends. I could have said, “OK, John Riley went through this and that”; however, I felt that if I allowed Riley’s own ghost to – albeit briefly – look back on his life, I would endow the character with a soul and the story would be more intense.

MO: *I know it’s been quite a long time since you wrote Without a Glimmer of Remorse. Still, would you say that Jules Bonnot and John Riley have something in common?*

C: Yes, sure. Bonnot and Riley, like other characters in my books, are expected to be read as almost universal symbols – symbols that can be found at different times in history, even today. I wrote *Without a Glimmer of Remorse* thinking of many people of my generation who got involved in suicidal armed struggle in the 1970s. I found a strong symbol of this in all the people who got into anarchism out of desperation, frustration, mistreatment and rebelliousness rather than revolutionary ideals in the early twentieth century.

I wanted to give them dignity, tell the reader, “Look, these are the newspaper accounts of Bonnot’s crimes. They present him as a desperate criminal who robs banks. Now I want to tell you that his father worked like a slave at the foundry and that he was born unlucky, was a very sensitive person and wanted to leave poverty. Also, I want to tell you, dear reader, that Jules Bonnot could have been successful in life because he was a natural with motors, but he just wasn’t allowed to”. I tell the reader that, sometimes, when we judge

a criminal quickly and demand their imprisonment or even their execution, we ought to consider that there may have been a time when this person tried to do something good and failed because of the circumstances. We should wonder whether their circumstances made them a criminal.

I wanted to convey Bonnot as a symbol of what happened in Italy about forty years ago. For example, in the 1970s, not every extreme-left militant was a natural born killer. They weren't fanatics who planted bombs in the streets to kill innocent people. I believe they were anti-systemic people looking for revenge rather than real political change, although some in the Red Brigades were actually craving for an impossible revolution. How can you expect to start a revolution in Italy, in Europe, in the 1970s? That was utter madness – even more so because many of them were educated people, they weren't brutes who had been born violent. Still, they were utterly and completely wrong.

In these stories, I try to tell that, sometimes, beyond what you see in the newspaper lies a hopeless life that deserves to be known because a heightened sensitivity may lead you to do outrageous things that may be mistaken for cruelty.

MO: Finally, are you planning to return to Irish topics shortly?

C: Not at the moment, but who knows...I've always been interested in Ireland, although truth be told, my knowledge of the country is pretty shallow. I don't really know much about Ireland beyond what I've researched for *Quelli del San Patricio*.

The book has given me the chance to meet a young professor who teaches Irish and English Literature in Rome and Perugia and spends long periods in Dublin. He's trying to get me invited to Ireland. He came back from Dublin in May and gave me a flag of the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a green flag with a harp and the motto *Erin Go Bragh* underneath. It's still made and sold in Dublin.

It's really difficult to find a publisher to work with in Ireland. There aren't many *Irish* publishers there – most books sold in Ireland are actually published in Great Britain. I really hope *Quelli del San Patricio* will give me the opportunity to get published there. I have a big problem with the language, though. My English is limited and I get really frustrated when I'm unable to hold a conversation.

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